

The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy

BY LINDA ROBINSON

United States special operations forces (SOF) have engaged in a number of long-duration missions around the globe in the last 15 years. One of those, *Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines* (OEF-P), epitomized the type of partnered, light footprint approach that recent defense strategy guidance has called for as a way to defend U.S. national security interests and promote global stability without incurring the crushing cost or unwanted side effects of large-scale military interventions.¹ The requirements for success through this approach, and the limits of its application, have been a matter of ongoing debate. Some skepticism derives from doubts about the will, probity and/or basic capability of the host or partner nations that the United States has tried to buttress. Another source of skepticism has been the apparent inefficacy of the U.S. approach to building partner capacity, as illustrated most prominently by the Iraqi army's disintegration in 2014 after more than \$20 billion in U.S. assistance from 2003-2011, and by the difficulties the Afghan army has encountered in taking on the Taliban as the U.S. forces have drawn down.² An exception in both of these cases has been the Iraqi and Afghan special operations forces, which have demonstrated notably greater capability and fortitude. These elite units were intensively trained, advised, and assisted by U.S. and coalition special operations forces over the course of a decade, which suggests that there may be some valuable and possibly fungible lessons to learn from the way in which SOF approaches this mission.

The U.S. special operations forces' 14-year engagement in OEF-P offers a case in which U.S. SOF were the primary outside force supporting a partner nation's security forces. While conventional forces played supporting roles in the effort, and non-military entities such as the U.S.

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Agency for International Development (USAID) carried out parallel programs, U.S. SOF were the architects of the overall design and execution of the U.S. counterterrorism (CT) program carried out in the southern Philippines. The Philippine government and armed forces were not only active players but the leading actors in the entire endeavor. This case thus provides a reasonably good laboratory in which to view the effects of this approach to building partner capacity in order to defeat terrorist threats. The U.S. Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, instituted in 2015, rests on the premise that at least some U.S. CT programs can be carried out in this fashion.³

OEF-P was aimed at enabling the Philippine security forces to combat transnational terrorist groups in the restive southern region of Mindanao. After an initial phase in which 1,300 U.S. forces arrived in the region to help the Philippine military hunt down terrorists who had taken U.S. citizens and other foreigners hostage, U.S. forces thereafter averaged 500-600 at any one time. These forces did not enter into combat—perhaps the most critical difference distinguishing this case from Afghanistan and Iraq, where U.S. SOF engaged in combat alongside their local partners. This noncombat rule was also applied in Colombia, another long-duration SOF mission to bolster the ability of Colombia to fight the narcoterrorist *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). The U.S. forces in the Philippines did, however, provide an array of services and assets in direct support of Philippine operations in close proximity to the front lines. This mode of training, advising, and assisting—including direct support for forces in combat—has become the norm in the current fight against the Islamic State of Iraq

and the Levant (ISIL). In some cases, U.S. SOF are permitted to undertake direct action raids, but in Iraq U.S. forces are alongside Iraqi special operations forces at the request of the Iraqi government. Many aspects of this current play-book hew closely to U.S. doctrine for foreign internal defense as adapted for counterterrorism missions in OEF-P.

The following account summarizes the key elements of OEF-P including the campaign design, the evolution of the campaign through five periods from 2001 to 2014, the campaign results and evidence of its impact, an assessment of the factors that contributed to and limited the campaigns success, and finally a consideration of the applicability of this case to U.S. counterterrorism policy and defense strategy more generally.

OEF-P Campaign Design and Adaptation

After the 9/11 attacks the U.S. and Philippine governments agreed to strengthen their cooperative counterterrorism efforts. The Philippine government invited the United States to assist in addressing threats in the southern Philippines, which has long been plagued by unrest and socioeconomic problems. The Muslim minority of the largely Catholic population is concentrated in the southern islands of the archipelago nation, which had been beset by a secessionist movement, the Moro National Liberation Front. The Philippine government created semiautonomous zones following a 1996 accord with that group, but continued talks with a splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Yet another faction, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), allied itself with al-Qaeda and engaged in numerous attacks and kidnappings of U.S. citizens and other foreigners. Due to their transnational terrorist character, ASG, as well as elements of the

Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) extremist group operating in the Philippines, became the focus of U.S. counterterrorism assistance to the Philippine forces. This nexus with al-Qaeda provided the basis for the U.S. authorization and funding for the 14-year U.S. operation, which became known as Operation *Enduring Freedom-Philippines*.⁴

The mutually agreed upon rules of engagement prohibited any U.S. combat roles, although U.S. SOF were permitted to be armed and to use force in self-defense if necessary. This ban on U.S. combat set the parameters and the tone for the entire effort: it was to be carried out primarily by the Philippines with the U.S. forces in support. The Philippine government and its armed forces were in the lead of every activity, and the U.S. forces and government never acted unilaterally. According to numerous participants in the mission, these rules of engagement prevented the type of mission creep that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan, where U.S. forces took the lead with nominal participation by the local partners.⁵

In the fall of 2001, U.S. special operations forces traveled to the Philippines to conduct an initial assessment under the leadership of Colonel David Fridovich that, with the participation of the Philippine government, evaluated the population, physical terrain, and socioeconomic conditions of the southern island of Basilan to aid in their mission analysis and planning. Following the initial assessment, Joint Task Force 510 (JTF-510), a special operations-led task force, deployed in February 2002 to conduct Operation *Balikatan 02-1* that provided civil-military operations, information operations, and training, advice, and assistance to security forces.⁶ This triad of civil-military operations, information operations, and

training, advice, and assistance is the traditional package of special operations activities employed in foreign internal defense (FID)⁷ by Civil Affairs units, Military Information Support Operations units (MISO), and Special Forces.

Following the initial assessment, JTF-510 deployed to the Philippines under the command of Lieutenant General Donald Wurster, then commander of Special Operations Command-Pacific based in Hawaii. The U.S. force numbered almost 1,300 personnel, including Army Special Forces, Civil Affairs, MISO, Naval Construction Brigade (CB) engineers, and Navy SEALs who provided training, advice, and assistance in maritime as well as land operations. The Air Force provided overhead surveillance assets, airlift, and medical teams. The Air Force Special Operations Command also provided advisors in later years. Among the operational advice and assistance rendered during the initial six months, JTF-510 provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support as well as direct advisory support to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the tracking and maritime raid that led to the death of then-ASG leader Abu Sabaya in June 2002.

Colonel Fridovich and JTF-510 developed a plan that focused on establishing security, promoting economic development, and ensuring the sustainment of the effort. The Civil Affairs units and engineers dug wells, established clinics, and built roads that supported the military effort and provided access to and greater understanding of the population and its concerns. These initial activities also began to encourage the population to look at the AFP and the Philippine government as a source of assistance rather than harassment or neglect. The Philippine soldiers began to be welcomed

in the towns they visited. This focus on the population was central to the effort: U.S. SOF developed a population and resources control handbook to guide its efforts and those of the AFP in understanding the grievances, mapping the insurgent support networks, and preventing material support to enemy activity. In combat operations, the U.S. SOF provided tactical battlefield advice, intelligence from unmanned aerial vehicles, casualty evacuation, and first aid.

In addition to this activity on Basilan, the U.S. SOF had begun an effort to build a Philippine counterterrorist capability in the form of the Light Reaction Battalion, which over the years would grow to company and then regimental size. U.S. SOF assisted the Philippine army at its Fort Magsaysay base in Luzon, north of Manila, to devise a selection course and training modules that drew from their own courses at Fort Bragg.

OEF-P Campaign Design: Lines of Operations

- (1) Training, advising, and assisting Philippine security forces (PSF), including the provision of direct support and intelligence
- (2) Conducting civil-military operations (CMO)
- (3) Conducting information operations (IO)

After JTF-510 redeployed, a brief hiatus ensued in 2002 as the two governments negotiated the terms of ongoing assistance, although short-term joint combined exercise training continued as discussions were under way with U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM). A PACOM proposal for a large force that would engage in combat was rejected by the

Philippine government, revealing the still-strong nationalist sensitivities of the Philippines, a one-time colony that closed U.S. bases in the 1990s. The decision was reached for a small-footprint approach that would be led for the next decade by the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P), which was commanded by an Army Special Forces colonel or a Navy SEAL captain (O-6 rank) officer on a yearlong tour. The JSOTF-P oversaw tactical advisory units deployed continuously on shorter rotations to train, advise, and assist a variety of Philippine military units. Over the years, many of the same special operators returned for four or five tours.

In 2005, the AFP focus, with the U.S. forces in support, turned to Jolo island, where ASG leaders went after the 2002 operation in Basilan. Initially, the Philippine military adopted a heavy-handed approach, and U.S. SOF were immersed in learning new terrain and a new population with a legacy of fierce resistance to outsiders. After readjustment to emphasize the civil affairs approach that had brought results in Basilan, the AFP began to make headway. Top ASG leaders were subsequently killed in 2006-2007. The Philippine military formed units to carry out civil affairs to provide services in neglected areas and conduct information activities to discredit the terrorists and gain support for the government. U.S. MISO units developed communications products including leaflets that advertised rewards for information on local insurgents and the various programs that were being carried out by the Philippine forces and government. During this period U.S. SOF began supporting naval units and extending its reach throughout the Sulu archipelago, including the island of Tawi Tawi which had, up until that point, functioned as a safe haven and conduit

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for illicit funds and advisers from Malaysia. In addition, a resurgence of ASG attacks in Basilan prompted the Philippine military and U.S. SOF to redeploy there in 2007.

In the next phase from 2008-2010, the U.S. effort became more distributed as SOF established planning and operations fusion cells in 15 locations in Mindanao, including the Central Mindanao region where ASG and JI elements had found refuge. U.S. SOF also began a multi-year effort to improve the Philippine air force capability in areas such as close air support, forward air observers, and precision munitions delivery. In the 2010-2012 period, significant adaptations in the campaign included a new focus on training and advising special police units (Philippine National Police Special Action Force) and

increasing police-military collaboration through fusion centers throughout the Mindanao region. The U.S. Department of Justice also provided police training and mentoring in such skills as preventive and investigative techniques.

In these latter years of the mission, U.S. SOF increased its collaboration with U.S. Embassy personnel and programs significantly. The JSOTF-P effort joined with a broader inter-agency approach to security in the southern Philippines. The Country Assistance Strategy of 2009-2013 articulated several U.S. government objectives in support of the Philippine government's national plan. The stated U.S. goal was to support a more stable, prosperous, and well-governed Philippines that was no longer a haven for foreign terrorist



U.S. Army Soldiers, Armed Forces Philippines Soldiers, and Philippine National Police officers participate in a humanitarian mission in Mindanao.

Campaign Adaptations and Inflection Points

2001 - Groundwork laid through assessment and host nation terms of reference

2002-04 - Basilan operations conducted by JTF-510, follow-on formation of JSOTF-P to support Philippine SOF and conventional force operations

2005-07 - Jolo and Sulu Archipelago (Operation *Ultimatum*)

2008-10 - Expansion to Central Mindanao and Precision Guided Munitions program (high point of geographically distributed footprint)

2010-12 - Transition to higher-level advisory roles, advise and assist special police units and military-police integration, and institutionalized interagency coordination
2012-14 - Transition planning, including risk mitigation and preparation for embassy-based functions

organizations. To that end, it pledged continued support for counterterrorism efforts, maritime security, defense institutional reform, and the transitioning of the internal security mission from the AFP to the Philippine National Police.⁸ U.S. development aid was also largely directed to the southern region. Roughly 60 percent of some \$80 million in annual U.S. economic assistance was devoted to Mindanao. The largest program, Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM), totaled \$180.9 million between 2002 and 2012 and was aimed in part at providing training and

employment for demobilized fighters. A follow-on grant of \$127.7 million began in 2012 to support the Mindanao Peace and Development Program. Specific projects included medium- and small-scale infrastructure, workforce preparation, small business development (such as fish farming), and governance improvement.

To provide the needed connectivity for this interagency effort, special operators were also detailed to the U.S. Embassy in Manila. With a few exceptions, the four career ambassadors who successively led the U.S. mission in Manila strongly supported and guided the overall effort. Two manifestations of the growing interagency cooperation were the Law Enforcement Working Group and the Mindanao Working Group (MWG), both formed and led by the U.S. country team. The first group, led by State Department representatives from the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) bureau, oversaw integration of the various law enforcement and rule of law initiatives that the U.S. government was supporting in the Philippines. The Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program provided personnel and conducted police training in Mindanao. JSOTF-P provided facilities and security to support their efforts, and hosted a full-time USAID representative at its headquarters in Camp Navarro in Zamboanga, the capital of Mindanao.

The other major adaptation of the later years of OEF-P was a shift from primarily tactical and operational level advisory support to institutional and ministerial level support aimed at preparing the AFP for sustaining its own efforts as the U.S. mission wound down. At the theater command, Western Mindanao Command in Zamboanga, U.S. SOF supported

the development of an intelligence fusion center and campaign assessment products. At Fort Magsaysay, U.S. SOF helped establish or expand headquarters for the army's special operations command and the elite Joint Special Operations Group. In Manila, JSOTF-P provided advisors and liaisons to assist in developing plans, strategies, and modernization efforts at the general headquarters and defense ministry. The JSOTF-P also emphasized police-military coordination through fusion centers around Mindanao and police training.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the successful results achieved was the formulation of a host nation national security plan, Plan Bayanihan, to address the security problems of the southern Philippines. The existence of such a plan is indicative of the country's own will and organizational capacity to tackle its problems. This is a fundamental pillar of the U.S. doctrinal approach to foreign internal defense—that it be conducted in support of a government that has framed and is implementing an Internal Defense and Development Plan. As the effort matured, the Philippine government developed such a plan, called Bayanihan or the Internal Peace and Security Plan. Under Bayanihan, the government called for a whole of society approach to resolving the conflicts in the country and shifted its focus to increasing the capacity of the police and transitioning the lead responsibility for internal security to the Philippine National Police.⁹ This plan was complemented by concerted efforts to reach a negotiated settlement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to extend the terms of an earlier accord. A follow-on peace accord was eventually concluded and some demobilization commenced; the

ensuing legislation proposed to implement the accord has not passed the legislature to date.

In September 2013, in what some U.S. SOF regarded as a real-world “graduation exercise” to test the years of training and mentoring, the Philippine military and government confronted a major challenge in Mindanao in the form of a complex urban assault on its capital, Zamboanga, by a splinter faction known as the Rogue Moro National Liberation Front. Intense fighting ensued and many hostages were taken. The Philippine president, Benigno Aquino, flew to the city to oversee the combined police-military operations to end the siege and hostage stand-off. The Philippine National Police Special Action Forces (PNP SAF) trained by the U.S. SOF performed well, as did the Special Operations Forces and other military units. U.S. SOF were not directly involved in the operation, though they observed the Philippine command meetings and, as the conflict surrounded their base, they were permitted to monitor the AFP operations and fly unmanned aerial vehicles for force protection.

PACOM had been debating for some time whether the Philippine forces were sufficiently capable to warrant drawing down the program. For several years, the JSOTF-P and its parent command in Hawaii, the Special Operations Command Pacific, had been preparing for transition. The threat from ASG had diminished but not disappeared, and as the JSOTF-P commander prepared to close down the Camp Navarro headquarters, he devised several options for mitigating the ongoing risks. Because U.S. Embassy programs had relied on U.S. military and contract air and U.S. SOF ground transportation to move around Mindanao and oversee its programs, alternative arrangements were needed. The Philippine

military was not eager to see the U.S. SOF mission depart, particularly after a severe setback in Central Mindanao in early 2015 in which PNP SAF troops were killed. JSOTF-P nonetheless officially ended its operations in February 2015. Over the preceding months, outstations were closed and the staff drawn down. Since then, ongoing advisory assistance is provided through SOF posted at the U.S. Embassy in Manila, as well as periodic training exercises by U.S. SOF and conventional forces.

Campaign Results

Although ASG still exists and poses a threat, as evidenced by the recent kidnapping and killing of two foreigners, the 14-year effort to bolster the Philippine security forces' ability to counter transnational terrorism may be considered successful by several measures. In terms of the impact on the adversary, enemy-initiated attacks in the ASG's three primary areas of operation declined 56 percent between 2000 and 2012.¹⁰ The areas in which they enjoyed relative freedom of movement also declined in this same period according to Special Operations Command-Pacific officials interviewed by the author. Finally, the estimated number of militants in the ASG declined from some 1,270 to 437.¹¹

In terms of the impact on the Philippine population and armed forces, independent polling conducted for U.S. SOF and the U.S. Embassy shows that support for the Philippine security forces in southern Mindanao increased from 51 percent to 63 percent and support for ASG declined from 8 percent to 2.5 percent. A wide range of Philippine officials and U.S. military sources interviewed judged that the capability of Philippine armed forces had increased over the period of OEF-P. The argument could be made that AFP might have

achieved this progress on its own, but interviewees pointed to the acquisition or increase in specific capabilities such as intelligence, close air support, precision-guided munitions, and land and maritime special operations. Similarly, U.S. SOF provided support in writing doctrine, training materials, and institutional development of civil affairs and information operations. One assessment found that special operations forces were relatively more capable in conducting their operations than units that were not trained by SOF.¹²

Finally, beyond the effects that U.S. SOF achieved in helping the Philippines reduce the transnational terrorist threat and increase its security force capabilities, the JSOTF-P mission contributed to an overall enhancement of the U.S.-Philippine military and overall bilateral relationship. Although Philippine concerns about Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea likely constituted the principal impetus for the recent agreements to allow U.S. forces to base in the Philippines, an argument can be made that U.S.-Philippine relations grew stronger throughout the past 15 years in part due to the provision of U.S. SOF advice and assistance. The two countries signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2014 and subsequently agreed to resume basing U.S. forces in the Philippines 25 years after the closure of the Clark and Subic Bay bases.

Contributing and Limiting Factors

Our recent study concluded that four principal factors contributed to the success that OEF-P did achieve.

- Maintaining a sovereign lead avoided U.S. dependency. According to the terms negotiated with the Philippine government at the outset, the Philippine government and

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armed forces retained overall control of the mission throughout OEF-P. U.S. forces operated in support of Philippine forces and did not conduct combat operations, unilateral or otherwise. This not only ensured ongoing host nation support but, just as importantly, avoided the development of dependency on U.S. forces. Such dependency can be a cause of mission failure after transition.

■ Campaign design was assessment driven. The U.S. SOF campaign design relied upon regular assessment and adaptation, in a textbook application of design theory. From the first assessment conducted by Colonel Fridovich, the initial plan and subsequent adaptations were based upon JSOTF-P assessments to determine current conditions and effects of operations. The basic campaign design remained intact, ensuring

continuity of approach in accordance with FID doctrine. Each adaptation responded to new conditions or host nation requirements to achieve greater capability and thus mission success.

■ U.S. SOF operations were sustained and synergistic and applied across the needed spectrum of Philippine forces, not just their SOF units. In some other cases, U.S. SOF have focused narrowly on counterterrorist units to the exclusion of other forces critical to achieving success on the battlefield. U.S. SOF did conduct their most intensive training, advising, and assistance of Philippine SOF units (particularly the Light Reaction Regiment, the Joint Special Operations Group, and the Naval Special Operations Group), but they also provided a lower but consistent level of training, advising, and



Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Spike Call, U.S. Navy

A U.S. Navy sailor and an Armed Forces Philippines soldier unload a box of humanitarian aid from USAID on Panay Island, demonstrating interagency and international cooperation.

assistance to a wide range of army, navy, marine, and air force units, and every echelon of command involved in the southern Mindanao campaign. As the primary theater for operations within the Philippines, most units cycle through the region in their training. Critically, the train, advise, and assist mission extended beyond training on bases to include operational assistance with direct support to units in the field, including the provision of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, medevac, and combat advice at the division, brigade, battalion, and, occasionally, company level. As noted in the opening section, the campaign design included heavy reliance on civil-military operations and information operations as well as support to building those capabilities within the Philippines armed forces. In the later phases of the campaign, increased emphasis was placed on creating fusion cells at higher echelons of command in Mindanao to foster intelligence sharing and police-military operational coordination. Finally, institutional development of forces and support to national military planning was also a focus of the later years of the campaign.

■ Interagency cooperation is often stated as an objective and achieved to varying degrees. In the OEF-P campaign, the JSOTF-P benefited from the fact that four career ambassadors led the U.S. country team for the duration. These experienced and distinguished senior foreign service officers brought a wealth of knowledge and stature to the job of civilian-military coordination. While their responsibilities leading one of the largest missions in Asia spanned a far greater range of duties than overseeing coordination for OEF-P, the ambassadors

traveled to southern Mindanao, engaged the senior Philippine leadership at appropriate times, and oversaw an increasing amount of coordination between the civilian country team and the JSOTF-P command group. A particularly productive relationship was formed between SOF and the long-serving USAID Mission Director, and placement of liaisons in the embassy and the JSOTF-P headquarters aided connectivity. The embassy's Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) handles the wide portfolio of security assistance including military sales and exercises (to include SOF's Joint Combine Exercise Training or JCET program), which necessitated close coordination to ensure synergy where possible. In particular, JCETs became the follow-on mechanism for sustained contact after OEF-P ended.

Several factors limited the overall success of OEF-P. One of those factors was the continued heavy emphasis on tactical-level training, advice, and assistance in the early years of the mission. The consequence was a delayed focus on the higher-echelon commands and institutional development, a delay that might have prolonged the mission or produced slower results. Second, interviewees noted that some of the Philippine government's decisions on platforms and other military purchases were not ideal for the conduct of a counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign. Third, the AFP capability remains limited in some respects, primarily in the basic training of conventional units, which suggests that the U.S. advisory support and the force generation and training model adopted by the Philippine armed forces may not be sufficiently effective. Finally, the

conflict drivers in the southern Philippines remain, due to political and socioeconomic grievances and the ability of extremist groups to find recruits among the population. The Philippine government over the past two decades has assiduously pursued negotiations with the Moro separatist groups, but splinter factions allied to al-Qaeda and now ISIL appear to win continued, if marginal, support. Although small, these factions retain their ability to conduct terrorist acts and deliberately target foreigners for maximum global impact.

Broader Lessons for Counterterrorism and Defense Policy

Several factors do set the OEF-P case apart from other recent U.S. attempts to support partners and conduct security operations through them. The most obvious factor is that the Philippine government possesses a relatively high level of functionality compared to Yemen and Somalia, which have been engulfed in civil war and practically operated without any functioning government at all. The Philippine government has experienced its share of problems, to include coup attempts and high levels of corruption, and it has generally devoted fewer resources to the troubled south. Yet by a number of indices it stands at a higher level of functionality. More importantly perhaps, the government has found the will to address its problems through a variety of programs, military and nonmilitary, even if they have not achieved their full objectives. Some level of functionality and some level of will are certainly baseline requirements for a partnered approach to work. Setting the bar too high, on the other hand, may deprive this policy approach of the opportunity to produce results. The U.S. security and economic training and assistance programs for El Salvador in

the 1980s and Colombia in the 1990s were highly controversial due to concerns about democratic rule, human rights abuses, and corruption. Yet both of those governments experienced notable improvements in both security and governance over the decade of U.S. assistance.

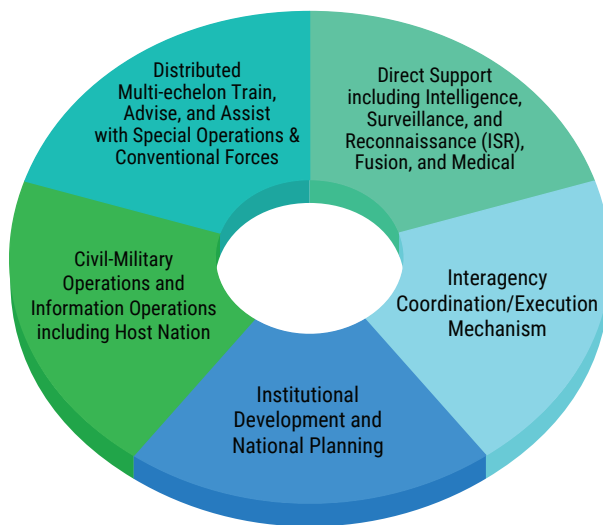
Another factor limiting the generalizability of the Philippine case is the almost uniquely close U.S.-Philippine relationship on a cultural level. Many Filipinos speak English, intermarriage rates are high, and many Filipinos have been educated in the United States or emigrated there. The ties that bind the two countries are rooted in the history of the Spanish-American war, and the liberation of the Philippines from Japanese occupation. Notwithstanding the intense feelings of nationalism that at times complicate personal and political relationships, this foundation provides a great many benefits in training, advising, and assisting the Philippine security forces.

Another factor that may well have amplified the effect of the OEF-P mission and the long-term presence of U.S. SOF was the fact that many Philippine officers who served in SOF units and formed close ties with U.S. SOF ascended to senior levels in the armed forces and defense ministry. The Philippine government has routinely promoted generals from its special operations units to the top positions in the army and then incorporated them into the civilian service after their uniformed careers end. In addition, as noted, many Philippine officers served one or more tours in Mindanao and therefore likely had some contact with U.S. SOF. This provided an opportunity for U.S. SOF to have an influence on the Philippine military in greater proportion than their small numbers might suggest.

Despite these factors, the basic elements of OEF-P can arguably provide the broad contours of a model for partnered counterterror-

forces, and a State Department contracted training company all played roles in stabilizing East Africa. This operation also served as a

Figure 1: A Model for Building and Employing Effective Partnered Operations in Complex Conflicts¹³



ism operations, which uses a full-spectrum approach to foreign internal defense that is negotiated with the partner nation government. This basic model has the following elements:

The model, of course, is not universally applicable and would need to be adapted to the local conditions and, critically, the sovereign government's wishes. In the absence of a functioning government, a multinational effort with international approval may be able to serve as the "partner." This was the case in East Africa—absence of a government in Somalia did not prevent progress via the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), a peace enforcement operation approved by the United Nations and overseen by the African Union, whose member countries contributed the forces. U.S. SOF, conventional

platform for counterterrorism efforts aimed at al-Qaeda in East Africa and al-Shabaab.

Some programs have been less effective because they have been implemented in a sporadic or less intensive manner than required; have focused on capacity building without the operational advisory component; and/or because the interagency contributions to governance and development have been lacking. For example, the State Department has overseen counterterrorism programs in both East and West Africa for many years, but they have not produced the desired results overall. The decade-long Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership was carried out at a low-level, mostly through sporadic SOF training and exercises of discrete units rather than as a comprehensive campaign with a persistent presence. There is now reason to focus on

designing an appropriately robust and integrated approach, as northwest Africa has become a much greater focus of interest, due to the multiple combined destabilizing influences of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the chaos of post-Qadhafi Libya, and the rise of Boko Haram as a cross-border armed threat. France has become significantly involved, providing an additional source of commitment, resources, and manpower to partnered counterterrorism. Additionally, the European Union has launched a UN-approved training mission in Mali. This formula might be followed in Libya if the fledgling government survives and comes to the conclusion that it will need help with its many security needs, including creating a new military and securing the country against transnational terrorists.

Other examples of partial successes include Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S. SOF trained and operated alongside Iraqi and Afghan Special Operations Forces who proved to be the most competent and professional units in those two countries. Two critical factors accounting for those successes were intensive mentoring and force generation models built on the Special Forces' own selection and training techniques. Iraqi and Afghan Special Operations Forces currently select and train their own troops with minimal input from the U.S. mentors. But too many other elements of the overall effort to build functioning Afghan and Iraqi institutions for security, governance, and development have lagged, so overall the campaigns did not produce the desired results. By contrast, the decade-long effort in Colombia to build and employ security forces capable of countering powerful drug trafficking and insurgent groups was a resounding success, alongside substantial progress in development and local governance. Credit for this

latter success must be apportioned between the strong will and effort of the Colombian government and the full-spectrum supporting efforts of U.S. State Department, USAID, and military programs. In Colombia as in the Philippines, the intensive training, advising, and mentoring provided by U.S. SOF did not include combat advising, though it did include substantial financial and technical support to building a rotary wing capability that was vital to combat in the Andean highlands and trackless jungles.

A few other basic principles emerge from examination of the OEF-P experience. These include:

- A relatively long-term commitment is required to produce results. Making such a commitment requires an assessment that U.S. interests merit the investment. However, these investments are less costly in the long run than major military interventions, and they have produced results in areas that are not typically considered zones of "vital" U.S. interests.
- As the U.S. president's representative, the support of the U.S. ambassador and country team is vital for any such effort to be undertaken. Moreover, the embassy serves as the primary interlocutor with the host nation government and the country team supplies vital non-military assets to what is rarely a purely military effort.
- Foreign internal defense must be conducted in support of an internal defense and development plan that is crafted and embraced by the host nation government. That government's commitment to developing capabilities and addressing the sources of conflict is a sine qua non for success. Development of security capability alone will empower the military in ways

potentially counterproductive to democratic governance, so a mix of development, governance, and security programs will usually be required.

■ Partner capacity is very often in need of bolstering at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of the relevant security institutions. A multi-echelon and multi-functional approach to building partner capacity will provide the most sustainable and effective capability. Creating CT units alone will provide little enduring capability if there are no capable “hold” forces, professional police able to conduct evidence-based operations and community policing, a functional judicial system, logistical capabilities, command structures with trained staff, or institutions capable of training, resourcing, and managing the array of forces needed.

■ Civil Affairs and military information support operations (MISO) have the potential to perform missions above the tactical level and should be routinely incorporated into advisory missions. These are valuable military assets that can shape the nonmilitary and non-kinetic aspects of the conflict, as many ambassadors have found in recent years. These small teams at embassies or SOF nodes have helped to identify and address grievances and other drivers of terrorist recruitment and instability.

■ Command and control (C2) of persistent, distributed operations should be located forward to the extent possible. A distributed C2 structure that places field-grade officers in the relevant country or region is the best way to gain and maintain situational awareness, connectivity with



Staff Sgt. Christopher Hubenthal, U.S. Air Force

Philippine National Police members train with U.S. Army Special Forces.

interagency and host partners, and the ability to assess and adapt in a timely manner.

■ A SOF presence in U.S. embassies of relevant countries is desirable to achieve the needed interagency cooperation. Military career paths should permit or even encourage SOF liaison assignments without prejudice to individual careers. Achieving increased synergy between security assistance and security force assistance activities should be a priority to ensure that the training and advisory functions are complemented by the needed types of material assistance.

■ The smallest footprint that can execute the mission is most desirable, but to achieve effects the presence must be continuous. Sporadic engagement may be a significant factor in the lack of results achieved in cases such as West Africa. The size of the SOF footprint and the rhythm of engagement should not overwhelm either the interagency partners or the host nation.

■ Every plan requires a transition. Skepticism over the utility of building and using partners gains traction when partners never graduate to self-sufficiency. Thus, plans should be grounded in specific goals and timelines that estimate the speed at which a given partner can progress. The plan should have distinct phases including: an initial thorough-going assessment; a second phase in which SOF and others assume the lead in training and producing an indigenous training cadre; a third phase in which the training cadre assumes responsibility for the primary activity; a fourth phase in which SOF's intensive advisory and assistance role gives way to an observer role; and, finally, a transition phase in which periodic visits are used to ensure that the desired capability is

being maintained locally and employed according to plan. Many participants remarked on the slow winding down of OEF-P over a period of years, but a gradual tapering off carries far less risk than the opposite course, as was seen in Iraq and is currently under debate in the U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan.

U.S. policy guidance places ample and appropriate weight on the need to achieve U.S. national security objectives as much as possible through allies, partners, and friends (who may even be informal militias). This is a cost-effective and historically sound approach to maintaining global peace and stability; indeed U.S. alliances and partnerships have undergirded the world order fashioned since the end of World War II. However, the actual conduct of security force assistance as part of integrated civilian-military campaigns has received less emphasis in U.S. military education and training. The on-the-job training and ad hoc innovations of the past 15 years are rapidly receding from memory as budget cuts have eliminated the structures and as senior leaders retire from the force.

To ensure that viable, cost-effective, scalable models are developed and further refined, greater attention will be needed on the part of both the institutional and operational force. The lessons and techniques that special operations forces have developed can be readily adopted and applied by other military and civilian agencies working in concert. There are additional lessons still to be mined from other quarters, civilian, military, and foreign. Those still engaged in campaigns in Iraq, Syria, Africa, and elsewhere require this focused support to aid their own efforts at holistic approaches to complex conflicts. The era of large-footprint, trillion-dollar

counterinsurgency campaigns has ended, and the new era of cost-effective approaches to security still remains to be firmly set on a steady course. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The National Military Strategy of the United States 2015 states that “we are working with allies and partners to deter, deny, and – when necessary – defeat potential state adversaries. Concurrently, we are leading multiple coalition efforts to disrupt, degrade, and defeat VEOs [violent extremist organizations].” “The United States Military’s Contribution to National Security,” June 2015, <www.jcs.mil>. The same reliance on partners was articulated in the February 2015 National Security Strategy released by the White House and the 2012 defense strategic guidance, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense.”

² Loveday Morris and Missy Ryan, “After more than \$1.6 billion, Iraqi army still struggles,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqs-army-is-still-a-mess-two-years-after-a-stunning-defeat/2016/06/09/0867f334-1868-11e6-971a-dadf9ab18869_story.html>.

³ The Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund provides support and assistance to foreign security forces or other groups or individuals to conduct, support, or facilitate counterterrorism and crisis response activities pursuant to section 1534 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015. \$800 million and \$1.1 billion in funds were enacted for FY2015 and FY 2016 respectively, and \$1 billion was requested for FY 2017. Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, February 2016, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), <http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_CTPF_J-Book.pdf>.

⁴ The Philippine government also faces an ongoing threat from the communist New People’s Army, which seeks to overthrow the government. Although much diminished in strength and numbers, this threat remains a preoccupation for the government. While the U.S. assistance did not address that threat, the Armed Forces of the Philippines reassigned units trained by the U.S. Special Operations Forces to other areas of the country to address it. This example illustrates the reality that U.S. interests, which were focused on globally-linked terrorist movements, may not entirely coincide with a partner nation’s assessment of its own interests.

⁵ The author interviewed approximately 150 participants in OEF-P in research for the Joint Special

Operations University and for the recent RAND publication, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, by Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, Gillian S. Oak (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016).

⁶ Other accounts of the early years and first half of the OEF-P campaign include David P. Fridovich and Fred Krawchuk, "Winning in the Pacific: Special Operations Forces and the Indirect Approach," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 44, 1st Quarter 2007, pp. 24-27; COL Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operations: OEF-Philippines and the Indirect Approach," *Military Review*, Vol. 86, No. 6, November-December 2006, pp. 2-12; and COL (ret.) David S. Maxwell, "Foreign Internal Defense: An Indirect Approach to Counterinsurgency/Counterterrorism, Lessons from Operation Enduring Freedom- Philippines for dealing with Non-Existential Threats to the United States," unpublished paper presented at Foreign Policy Research Institute conference, December 6, 2011.

⁷ According to the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (JP 1-02), foreign internal defense is "(DOD) Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security. Also called FID. Source: JP 3-22."

⁸ U.S. Department of State, U.S. Mission to the Philippines, Country Assistance Strategy, 2009-2013, pp. 5, 15.

⁹ Interview with former JSOTF-P commander, August 14, 2013.

¹⁰ The statistical analysis was conducted by Patrick B. Johnston for the previously cited RAND publication. Statistics were provided by the Empirical Studies of Conflict database, courtesy of Joseph Felter, co-director of the ESOC project at Princeton, who has conducted both operations and research in the Philippines for many years.

¹¹ These estimates cited are from the Philippine armed forces. Other statistics vary but are roughly comparable. For example, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013" (U.S. Department of State, 2014) estimated the number of ASG members at 400. The department's 2000 report, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, estimated the number of ASG members at "more than 2,000" (U.S. Department of State, 2001).

¹² Joseph Felter, "Taking Guns to a Knife Fight," in Joseph H. Felter, *Taking Guns to a Knife Fight:*

Effective Military Support to COIN, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, thesis, April 1, 2009. As of September 5, 2015: <<http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA510853>>. An expanded version PhD dissertation employing a microdata set of 12,000 incidents between 2001 and 2012. His findings indicate that the quality of such elite forces is not fully determined by factors such as state wealth or level of development, which in turn carries important policy implications for the professional training of militaries in reducing the damage from, and possible prospects for, protracted insurgencies and civil wars.

¹³ Drawing by author.

Photos

Page 150. Image by Keith Bacongo. Into the marsh... From <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/kitoy/2704303280>>. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>>. Photo unaltered.